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Amazing! The Thing Is Bugged!

I sit way out in what used to be the country waiting for developers to come and ugly everything to death. Why are they called "developers"? Since their job is creating blight, "blighters" would be more logical, but maybe too British. If we quit calling their work "development" and called it "uglification," we could call them "uglifiers."

But that's another subject. I bring it up only to illustrate how far I live from the great sophisticated, cunning, urban realities. Out here we are so far from the world's vital parts that uglification of the meadows, creeks and orchards has just reached the stage where they cover the courthouse lawn with a 350-car parking lot.

Even here, though, the spy news is dismaying. The dismaying thing is not the news that the Russians do espionage, but that important people who live and work in the vitals of Washington are amazed to learn it.

None of them have yet come right out and said, "I am amazed, absolutely amazed, to learn that Soviet Communists with their highly publicized K.G.B. would spy on us," but we are not illiterates out here. We can read the print between the lines. We can hear what political people really mean while uttering mushmouth sounds on television.

What comes across is the amazement of these extraordinarily no-moss-on-me Washington people. They are flabbergasted, absolutely flabbergasted to learn that the Russians are so base, so vile, so unsporting as to put eavesdropping devices in the new embassy they built for us in Moscow.

They are not amazed, of course. They are trying to fool us. They think we are so dumb out here that we will buy anything.

You can imagine them telling each other, "They're so dumb out there that they think uglification is development, so dumb they've already sprung for the 350-car parking lot on the courthouse lawn."

Only when smooth, cunning, urban people start talking that way can they kid themselves that we out here are ripe for the old snake-oil pitch.

Well, of course they are not amazed. Nobody could be that dumb and get on the Federal payroll. The dimmest Americans knew the Russians had a neurotically excessive passion for espionage, and knew it long before Ian Fleming begat James Bond.

If you decide to let the K.G.B. supply labor to build you a new embassy in Moscow, you presumably expect to get a state-of-the-art amplifier for the live broadcast of embassy doings straight into K.G.B. headquarters. So why would anybody in Washington be amazed to discover this may be what we got?

The glib explanation is, so they can

next be outraged. Outraged is a valuable state for politicians. In the outraged condition, a politician may serve himself precious publicity by demanding resignations, insisting on investigations, denouncing newsworthy personages as boobs if not well-poisoners, and diverting public attention from embarrassing reality.

Suppose we out here in trembling anticipation of the coming uglification paused to glance at Washington for a moment, saw everybody being as amazed as a 3-year-old looking at the two-headed calf, and said right out loud:

"If you birds didn't intend from the very start to have the new embassy built as a broadcasting center for the K.G.B., how come you kept supplying money all these years to go ahead with construction?"

Nobody likes having to explain why he was asleep at the switch, and politicians are no exception. Feigning amazement — "I am shocked, shocked to discover there is a switch there!" — carries them neatly forward to the outrage mode where they can divert the public mob with politically fruitful nonsense.

In the case of the Amazingly Bugged Embassy the political stakes may be more complex than usual, since the uproar serves to intensify natural public suspicion of the Russians at a moment when Mikhail Gorbachev is trying hard to persuade the world that Russian Communism is not the malevolence it used to be.

Mr. Gorbachev seems beset by the Soviet Union's own variety of "hard-liners." In Washington the term describes people who oppose changing the basic policy devised in the time of Dean Acheson for surviving the cold war. In Moscow it might describe those who oppose changing the bellicose confrontational policy dating from the time of Stalin.

The amazement in Washington this week has the smell of an American "hard-liner" gambit in support of the ancient and honorable Acheson policy. Of course, I could be all wet. Waiting for the uglifiers, admittedly, can make you excessively suspicious. □